

The Ethiopian

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- [0 : 0 0] One of the most striking and attractive things about the early church was its diversity. It's one of the reasons why it had such a massive impact on the Roman Empire for some couple of centuries of its existence. Because for the first time in history, you have a community that was made up of people that historically have been divided, uneducated people right alongside high-level Jewish people, slaves right alongside their former masters, Jews right alongside Gentiles, wealthy right alongside the poor.
- And what makes me the more amazing is that this was happening long before diversity was something people cared about or valued or pursued.
- And in fact, I think you could make a strong case that the reason people care about it so much today is a direct result of the impact of the Christian church on the Roman civilization.
- The diversity was not a value in the first century. In fact, the earliest Christians, if they had been left on their own devices, if they had their way, Christianity arguably would have remained a small, mostly Jewish sect.
- [1 : 2 8] So there is this historic question that presents itself to us. What happened? What happened to catalyze what has become a global movement?
- And the short answer to that question is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit happened. And then all of the early Christians had to scramble to catch up with what God was doing.
- The resurrected Jesus, as we heard in John's Gospel reading just a moment ago, promised that before he departed he would send another helper, the Spirit of Truth, who would be with his disciples, and be with and empower the church in its mission.
- And that's exactly what happened. But it went way beyond what they could have even imagined. Willie James James, in his commentary on the book of Acts, says that the clearest evidence of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts is, quote, that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go.
- The Holy Spirit compelled them to go to the very people that they would least like to go to, people they would never have gone to on their own.
- [2 : 4 6] And Jennings says, quote, that drive to cross boundaries and borders is what marks the presence of the Spirit of God. So we think about a Spirit-filled church.
- And I don't know what you think about when you hear that phrase, a Spirit-filled church. Maybe you think about people speaking prophecy or speaking in tongues or being slain in the Spirit or being healed by the Spirit.
- Fair enough. But according to the book of Acts, a Spirit-filled church is one in which people are compelled to cross boundaries and borders and go after those who would be considered in that society to be the other, the unreachable, the unclean, the untouchable.
- And so the book of Acts is full of unexpected Holy Spirit-driven encounters. And we're going to look at one this morning in Acts chapter 8. This encounter that A.J. read about just a moment ago between a traditional Jewish man.

He was a colonized, he was probably spoken Greek, he was a Greek name, but he's a traditional Jewish man. And a gender-nonconforming black African.

[3 : 54] So we're going to look at this encounter and then we're going to look at some of the implications for us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your spirit. And we know that we need to be careful what we pray for you.

Because if we pray that you could show up, you might actually show up. And if we pray that you would speak to us, you might actually speak to us. And if you speak to us, we might actually have to respond.

And if that happens, then Lord, it clearly means that we're not in control. So with fear and trembling, we ask that you would speak to us this way. That you would manifest yourself.

That we would joyfully who would push control to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So let's look first at this encounter in Acts chapter 8. This passage opens with Philip.

Philip is one of the deacons. First appointed to care for the poor in the church in Jerusalem. One of the original deacons. And he's also clearly a very gifted evangelist.

[4 : 54] And so God sends him to the road that connects Jerusalem to Gaza. And a version of that road exists today. And he sits in there because he wants him to meet a man who is coming.

He's returning to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. Now we don't know this Ethiopian person's name. But we do know that he was very successful in his career.

He's a highly ranking official in the court of Candace. The queen of Ethiopia. The fact that he has a chair atonym finans is probably very high status. But we're told in pretty very important detail that this man is a unit.

That was the price of his success. If you were a male commoner, the only way that you could serve in such a high level job would be to allow yourself to be castrated. That would mean that the royal men of the court would know that you wouldn't be a threat to the royal women of the court.

So it was the price of admission to those higher status positions. But these days, we would probably refer to someone like this as gender non-conforming. This is a person who had sacrificed everything for his career. He had given up the possibility of a family, he had given up the possibility of children, and yet despite all of his success and status, when we meet him, he's still very much unfulfilled.

[6 : 22] He's unfulfilled. And you know, you see this a lot of people, once they have attained success in their lives. I've read so many interviews over the years. People, everyone from Tom York, the front man of the band Radiohead, one of my favorite bands, to Kevin Durant, the NBA star, right?

You, again and again and again, across various fields of confessions, you see people saying verses of the same thing. Now, I was struck because these two men in their interviews said almost were made of the same thing.

Basically, I thought when I got to where I wanted to be, I thought when I attained success, everything would be different. I thought it would finally fill the void. But now that I'm successful, I realize the void is still there.

Judd Apatow, the successful film director says in his interview, there's a great distraction in thinking, when I get to the top of that hill, it's all going to be awesome.

And then when you get to the top of the hill, you're like, oh, well, I guess now I really have to deal with my problems, because that didn't work at all. People think that when they attain that successful life and they reach that plateau, everything's going to be different, and they realize it's not. And that brings a lot of exclusion.

- [7 : 38] And so this Ethiopian official is in a stage of his life where he is beginning to realize that no amount of success is going to fill the void, and so he's starting to wonder about God.
- Now, in his own country, the people worship his son. But somewhere along the way, he has heard about the God who made his son, and that's the God he wants to know.
- He knows enough to know that the God of the Bible isn't like any of the other gods in Ethiopia or any other nation for that matter. He had started to want to know more, so he had gone to great lengths to obtain a written copy of the book of Isaiah, which would have been a scroll at that time.
- No verse or chapter reference. It just would have been a long, written scroll, very rare, very valuable, but somehow he had gotten his hands on a copy.
- It had actually gotten the point in his life and in his seat where he had decided to risk it all to know this God. And so he had decided to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which is about a 500-mile journey.
- [8 : 49] This would have been incredibly expensive. This would have been incredibly dangerous. There's a good chance that you wouldn't survive a journey like this. He would have had to probably leave his job, his entire community, for several months, risking never seeing him again.
- And you can imagine the people in his home country, when he told them, his family, when he told them that this was his plan, they probably thought he was out of his mind.
- You know, the ultimate midlife crisis for this man. And yet he barks at this time. Because he's really going to risk it all for the chance to finally meet this God.
- And so imagine he travels that 500 miles and he makes it. He finally gets to the gates of the temple and he can't wait to finally come in. And they arrive at the temple and all their hopes that the fulfillment he's seeking is finally going to be found.
- But of course we know what would have happened. Because we know what Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1 says. That no eunuchs are allowed in the temple.
- [10 : 01] So 500 miles on the road, he would have pulled up to the temple and he would have been told, no uncertain terms, your kind isn't welcome.
- Now I don't think any of us in this room can really imagine what that would have felt like. But it's a kind of rejection on such a deep and such a personal level. It's a kind of rejection that could potentially destroy a person.
- We can't imagine. We can only ponder what this man might have felt. Because this man couldn't change who he was. He couldn't change the decisions that he had made.
- And it very much seems as though this man is doomed to remain an outsider rejected by God forever. So I believe, this is why this man is reading Isaiah.
- Because I think he is looking for anything that might offer hope or might offer some answer. And if he's reading in Isaiah, and he's reading, he's scrolling for Isaiah, he would have come across Isaiah chapter 56, which would have grabbed his attention.
- [11 : 19] Because that is where it says this, Let not the eunuchs say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and begin my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.
- I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Can you imagine what he would have felt as he's riding back, still reeling from the rejection, and he's reading these scriptures, and he comes across those words.
- This man had gone to the temple, he had the door slammed in his face, but here God is saying, One day, eunuchs, outcasts, people like him, are not only going to be welcomed into God's family, but once they're joined to God, they will never be cut off.

It's going to be an eternal union. And in that relationship, they're going to be given something better than sons and daughters. They're going to be given eternal inclusion in the house of God.

An eternal family. And so you can imagine his next day. And he's thinking, How? How is this possible? How could the temple say no?

[12 : 39] How could the law of 1b3 say no? And yet this scroll is saying, At some point the answer will be, it resounding in eternal yes. So he would have rolled back and scrambled, right?

Again, no chapter or verse references. He would have been rolling back, trying to figure out, how, how, when does this happen? What makes this possible? And so he would have gone back, just a few, what we consider to be chapters.

He would have gone a few back, and he would have come across Isaiah chapter 53. And this is the passage that he happens to be reading, he happens to be reading, when Philip comes upon him.

This is the passage that explains how a dog can make such a promise. And here's what this passage says. Surely he has worn our griefs, and carried our scars.

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our indignities. Upon him was the punishment that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep on a string, have turned everyone to his own way.

[13 : 44] And the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. Somehow, this person is going to take on all of the iniquity of the world.

He's going to make it possible for people to come to know God personally. And so, this man would have said, who in the world is this? Who would voluntarily take on the grief of the world?

Who would become an addict? Who would become like a unit? Who would become like a leper? Who would become like a criminal? Who would become like someone who is unclean in order to allow a person like me in?

Who would quietly and obediently trade places with outcasts? Who would do that willingly? So that the outcasts could be invited into the house of God for eternity while he is slaughtered.

And he's waiting, and he's like, who in the world can this be? And that is precisely when Philip comes alongside him. See, in those days, whenever he's not read aloud, it's normal to read aloud when you're reading.

[14 : 53] So this official would have been riding a dog, reading aloud, and Philip literally comes alongside him as the Spirit commanded him to do. And I almost believe as chariots come along, and Philip comes running up beside him, and he hears him reading, and he goes, do you need help understanding that?

Do you know what you're reading? It's kind of a funny scene. But you can imagine that the chariot's stopping and then fighting full of love, and the words almost tumbling out of this Ethiopian man's mouth.

He can't even get the words out fast enough. You know, who is this? Who is this person? Is it Isaiah? Is it somebody else? Who is it?

And you can imagine Philip catching his breath. I can tell. His name is Jesus. And he loves you more than you can possibly imagine.

And this man here, at the door, slammed in his face by the law in Jerusalem. In that moment, finds another door opened in the person of Jesus Christ.

[16 : 05] Philip would have shared the gospel with him his invitation to become a member of the household of God. By faith, all you have to do is put your faith in Jesus. Allow his forgiveness and righteousness to become your forgiveness and righteousness.

And so this Ethiopian man comes to faith in Jesus. And the transformation is so immediate and so radical as they go along the road that he looks and he sees some water on the side of the road.

And he immediately says, well, if all of this is true and if I've come to faith, why can't I be baptized right now? Why would I care so much about that? Well, that's what baptism is.

See, baptism is the symbol that marks you as a member of the household of God forever. It's a symbol of this promise. And he says, I want that mark on me.

I want that symbol on me. I want the whole world and I want to know that now I have this room. Now I have a community.

[17 : 08] Now I belong. And so they stop the chariot and they go down and they water both of them and they baptize them right in there right on the side of the road. And it's, you know, Christian tradition actually says that this Ethiopian eunuch is the one who then brought the gospel to Ethiopia and he shared it with the queen and with the court and that they began to come to faith and tradition says that through him and in the court of campus the rest of the, the, the, the, the seeds of the Christian gospel were planted there in Ethiopia.

It's an amazing story. What does it have to teach us? I think there are implications here first for those of us here who are Christians who desire to share our faith or maybe who think we should desire to share our faith.

It gives us a completely different way to think about sharing our faith. I think most people, certainly most Christians, are very popular with the idea of evangelism. A lot of people don't even like the word evangelism.

in our culture I think religion is seen as very much a private thing. Something that you're very much expected to keep to yourself and trying to foist your beliefs on other people is seen as to be very rude or unacceptable behavior.

I want to make you clear that's not what we see happening here. This Ethiopian official is already spiritually open. He is already searching for something more.

[18 : 48] and Philip doesn't foist the gospel on him. Philip gives him the gospel the way you might give water to someone who's dying of thirst. He offers him the gospel the way you might offer food to someone who's dying of starvation.

And I would suggest that that is always how the gospel has been to be. the gospel is always good. See, sharing our faith isn't about techniques. It's not about getting the right arguments. Good arguments help.

It's not about manipulating you. Sharing our faith is primarily about paying attention to what the Holy Spirit has already done. The Holy Spirit is the evangelist.

And evangelism, sharing our faith is about paying attention to what the Holy Spirit is already doing in the lives of the people right around us. And as I think about some of the most gifted evangelists I know and some of you were in this church, they are, they are, without exception, people who seem to have a heightened sensitivity to what the Holy Spirit is doing in people's lives.

And they're willing to respond to that. See, if someone is not open to the gospel, there's nothing that you or I can do to change that. But when the Holy Spirit is working in someone's life, often, often, it doesn't immediately look like that.

[20 : 13] Often it presents itself as disillusioned or unfulfilled longings or times of grief or times of struggle.

In some way or another, that person is coming to realize that the things that they have built their life from, the places they have put their house, that that's working anymore.

It's not working the way they thought it would. Right? They've realized that success, as we said, didn't fill the void. Now, as Joe D'Apatole says, now I have to figure out how to solve my problems another way.

Or they've realized that marriage didn't solve their problems. Or they've realized that politics can't solve the hardest problems. Or they've realized that science can't answer our deepest questions.

Or they've realized that they're not the good, upstanding considering the person that they thought they were. Maybe they've had a major moral failing that cracked into the truth just enough for them to take one hallmark glance at the person they were playing.

[21 : 19] Right? The Bible's comment, he writes, says that there are certain features of human life, certain things that matter to people everywhere, in every culture. Things like justice and beauty and freedom and truth and relationships and Wright calls these broken signposts because he says that every society and every individual cares about these things.

We all know these things matter and the reason is because that's how God made us. They're part of the human vocation and yet in each case no matter how hard we try we can never attain these things.

and he says how can we explain that for all of human history we care about these things and yet we've never been able to attain them. And he says the reason is because apart from God they are not attainable and so their broken signposts, the longing for these things is meant to point us to the God who makes them ultimately possible.

And so understanding this helps us understand that evangelism sharing our faith is really just about learning how to listen. It's about learning how to discover where those qualities are in the lives of people around us.

So a conversation about the gospel might start out as a conversation about injustices or about music or a great film or a really hard to do or the loss of a job.

[22 : 49] And we have to be able to listen very carefully when we are in conversation with people to be genuinely interested, genuinely curious while at the same time listening to the Holy Spirit.

Because the Holy Spirit is the one who can help us discern how and when it's appropriate to begin to tell people about Jesus the way Philip does. How and when we need to have the courage to take that next step.

And it does take the courage. It takes listening to the Holy Spirit and it takes courage. We're not told what Philip is thinking but he very well may be thinking something like if I tell this guy about Jesus is he going to laugh me all the way or is he going to kick me out of his chair?

He doesn't know how this guy is going to respond. He's just responding to what the Holy Spirit is prompting him and he's leaving the outcome in God's hands. So that's the first self-implication is just how we think about sharing our faith.

If we put ourselves at the center of it we've already lost our way but if we understand that the Holy Spirit is at the center of it and that our job is to listen to and respond to the work of the Spirit it totally changes how we think about it.

[24 : 06] The other implication is this it's an implication for our community. You know I don't think we can overlook the fact that this Ethiopian man is someone who we would consider today to be gender non-conforming.

You know honestly if he lived today in a place like D.C. he would probably include himself in the LGBT community because he would believe that would be a place where he could find belonging.

And this may not seem like the central point of the passage but I actually believe that Luke intentionally includes this story in Acts to illustrate how the gospel was going to the ends of the earth to the least likely people because in the first century Jewish imagination right the Ethiopian community was about as ends of the earth as you can imagine.

And I think that Luke includes this because he's he's wanting us to understand that when Jesus sends his followers to the ends of the earth to bring the gospel to the earth to bring the gospel to the earth and if that actually happens it means the church is about to become a whole more diverse.

So here's the question for us to wonder. There's clearly a place for this Ethiopian man and people like him in God's family and people like him and people like him to come to church and he's like to be a place in our church.

[25 : 34] Right? A lot of people assume that the only way LGBT people will ever go to church is if the church completely revises its theology. but that's not in fact true.

The biggest study done was the largest study ever on the religious backgrounds of people in the LGBT community who have left the church found a very surprising statistic that among gay-lisping people who left the church only 15% left for theological reasons which means 85% left for other reasons.

many of them felt there was no place for them. Many of them felt that they would never be able to really belong. And if one of them is somebody who's got a really good work on this, Mark Yarhouse has done an enormous amount of work on this.

His research was published in a book called Costly Obedience. And he cites a study that found that LGBT people of faith are two and a half times more likely to attend a church with a traditional sexual order.

And we've actually seen that in some instances in our own church. Right? And I'm so thankful for those of you who have come to call Advent. Right? And so Mark Yarhouse has some accepted people who have made that decision and some of them are in heterosexual marriages and some of them and many of them are sacral and celibate.

[26 : 58] And he's done all kinds of measures of their well-being and he's found across the board they tend to be more spiritually engaged more matured in their faith more committed to the church than the kind of average person.

He says across most measures of well-being they're doing fine except the biggest threat the biggest challenge that is faced by someone who makes that decision is the struggle to belong.

It's the ability to develop deep and meaningful friendships. It's the, it's coming to a place where you really feel like you're part of the community and not always on the outside looking at you.

And so that leads to increased anxiety in relationships, increased fear of abandonment, depression, loneliness. I believe that part of what it means to be a spiritual community is that no one feels like an inside regardless of their sexuality, their age, their life stage, their marital status, their class, their race.

I would love for our church to be known throughout the city as a place where we're just as committed to hospitality and ensuring that people belong as we are to biblical ethics.

[28 : 19] As a place where if you're serious about following Jesus you will never have to do that alone. You'll never have to worry about gunning it out by yourself. But for this kind of thing to be true, not only do we have to pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us the way He has been leading His church, since He came 2,000 years ago.

But for this to be true you have to be willing to follow the Holy Spirit, wherever the Spirit leads us, regardless of the borders or boundaries that we may have to cross together.

Let's pray. Lord, we recognize that a religion that we control is in many ways a lot more appealing because we get to determine exactly who we want to.

And we know that is something that is in us as human beings, a desire for comfort that has gone back to the beginning of our origins. that is in us.

We want to be in control. And we know that your Holy Spirit is here to remind us continually, among other things, because this is your church, it's not our church, and that you are the one who is desiring in the world now to call all people to yourself.

[29 : 49] Lord, and that you're able to reach people in ways that no one is ready to be and found. And that right now, we're at work in the hearts and lives of people all around this city. And those people need to know the gospel and they need a church home.

And Lord, we pray that your Holy Spirit would disturb and challenge and disrupt those of us who need it, who are clinging to our comfort, who are clinging to our desire and convenience and predictability.

Lord, that you can catalyze in our community a movement of the gospel out of the way. Lord, I pray that that would be a movement of your Holy Spirit and we can't engineer that.

It's something that you have to do again through us. And I pray that you're blessed to those here who do feel like they are on the outside of the way. And I pray that in whatever ways we have eradicated those walls that you tear those walls down.

Lord, I pray that you repent if and if that is necessary to make it so. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.